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NEW YORK AND ITS THREE LIBRARIES

BY RICHARD GARNETT

FOUR great principles, solemnly recognized by the French nation, meet the eye inscribed upon every public building in Paris. They are: “*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, Défense d’afficher.*” With the two latter we are not here concerned, but of the two former it may be said that they are a pair very unequally yoked. The certain effect of Liberty is to destroy Equality in the sense in which it is understood by most philosophical theorists; if, on the other hand, their conceptions had prevailed, New York would not possess, nor could we discuss, an Astor, a Lenox, or a Tilden Library. Should they, therefore, ever place an inscription corresponding to the French epigraph upon any of their public buildings, it will be advisable to make it clear that the equality denoted is that contemplated by the framers of the Declaration of Independence, and so perversely misunderstood by the champions of privilege no less than by the champions of the unimpeded exercise of their faculties and opportunities, and the uncontrolled disposal, subject to a very few obviously necessary restrictions, of whatever is rightfully theirs. The mischief which would have been wrought by legislative endeavors to bring about, not equality of rights, but equality of social condition, would always be proportionate to the wealth and public spirit of the community in which they were made. They would be especially conspicuous in communities of Anglo-Saxon race, inasmuch as it is always observed that among these the most prosperous institutions owe their existence to the munificence, or at least the impulse, of private individuals. When, however, these have laid the foundation, the State or the local community may often profitably step in and develop what it might not have been able to create. No more remarkable instance, perhaps, can be given than the growth of the British Museum out

of the bequest of Sir Hans Sloane, and the example may not be without profit to the city of New York, enriched as it has been by those similar benefactors—John Jacob Astor, who set the example; James Lenox, who followed it up; and Mr. Tilden, whose noble bequest, partly secured for the community after much legislation, has led to the fusion of the three libraries into one, which must be great if it is to be worthy of the Empire City.

It is remarkable that while the New York bequests, but for the element of fine art in Mr. Lenox's, are all library, the library was the weakest point in Sir Hans Sloane's. Though possessed of a most highly cultivated mind, Sir Hans was rather a man of science than a man of letters. He had been a great physician and a great naturalist. He had first signalized himself as a collector by returning from Jamaica in 1689 with specimens of eight hundred species of plants. He was then twenty-nine, and during the whole remainder of a life prolonged to ninety-two he was diligent in amassing not merely specimens of natural history, but books and manuscripts relating to them, as well as to his own professional pursuit of medicine. The Sloane MSS. in particular comprise not merely medical and scientific treatises, but correspondence with the leading physicians of the age and papers of the preceding generation which together, says Dr. Norman Moore, render it "one of the main sources of medical history in England from the time of Charles the Second to that of George the Second." The very completeness, however, of the Sloane collections in these respects shows how greatly, as was indeed inevitable, scientific interests predominated in the mind of the collector. Had Parliament forborne to take the matter up in an enlightened spirit the Museum might have become a kind of appendix to the College of Surgeons, to which, indeed, a portion of its contents ultimately did gravitate. It would have been a plausible contention that respect to Sir Hans Sloane's memory would be best evinced and his wishes most accurately interpreted by carrying out the objects to which his life had been devoted. It is probable, however, that he knew as well as the present distinguished head of the New York United Libraries knows, that while medicine and natural history have at least as good a claim as any other departments of human knowledge to be represented in the general library special collections of medical and zoological, geo-

logical or botanical treatises, are of all such collections the least profitable when a century old. Virtue has gone out of them, or rather it resides in their relation to the general progress of the human mind, which requires to be studied in libraries comprising every department of knowledge, and history and philosophy above all.

When, therefore, Sir Hans Sloane's collections did at length (1753) become public property by the will of the Collector, Government and Parliament had to consider whether they would simply preserve them in the state in which they came into their hands or whether they would engraft upon them a germ of growth and development. They adopted the latter course. They were not satisfied with having probably the best medical library that the age could produce, but took steps to strengthen it, so far as circumstances allowed, in the departments in which it was admittedly deficient and to provide for its future progress in these and all others. The Kings of England possessed a noble library formed originally by Henry VIII and augmented by every succeeding sovereign until Charles II, after whom their Majesties seem to have left off reading. Parting from his books, therefore, was not altogether so grievous a trial to George the Second as to William Roscoe; nevertheless, it is to his honor that he gave up to the nation the Old Royal Library, which, down to the death of James I at least, had been formed with great liberality and discrimination. There was a splendid collection of manuscripts, formerly the property of Sir Robert Cotton, at the time belonging to the nation; and another, formed by the two Harleys, earls of Oxford, was in the market. The Cottonian was transferred to the new library; the Harleian was bought for presentation. Not long afterward George the Third acquired the unequalled collection of Civil War and Commonwealth tracts formed by the bookseller, Thomason, between 1641 and 1660 and gave them to the nation. By these various additions Sir Hans Sloane's library was at once promoted from a condition of poverty in all branches of human attainment, except medicine and natural history, to a highly respectable position in most departments; and since the Kings as collectors had in a manner represented the nation, buying much the same books as a public librarian would have bought, it acquired something of a national character. So much was the character of the entire Sloane

bequest modified by these measures that when within a year or two it came to be organized as the British Museum it had two Keepers of literary departments (Printed Books and Manuscripts) against one only of science; and, although the first head of the institution was a man of science, this has never been the case with any of his successors.

The problem of the augmentation and general administration of the three libraries contrived at New York into a universal library may be thought to be simplified by the circumstance that while one, as yet represented solely by Mr. Tilden's bequest, has but a potential, though an assured, existence, thus permitting absolute freedom of development, the other two have had their course marked out for them by their founders. The funds available for the Astor Library became public property upon the death of Mr. Astor in 1848 and was incorporated in 1849. Its formation was intrusted in the first instance to Dr. Cogswell, an eminent scholar and bibliographer, who traced the lines on which it has been ever since maintained. Nor could they have been traced more wisely. Looking to the special needs of the great community of New York, Dr. Cogswell and the Trustees decided that the most judicious expenditure would be on Technology, Philology, and Natural Science, in all of which the Library has ever since maintained a leading position. Dr. Cogswell's munificent gift of his own library of bibliographical literature, comprising five thousand volumes, also gave the institution a character for wealth in this department. So well has the impress thus imparted been maintained that the Astor Library is said to contain hardly any "light and frivolous" books. On the other hand, it is subject to deterioration from the cause at which we have already glanced—namely, that a considerable proportion of the technological, philological, and scientific books so properly and, indeed, inevitably acquired tend to diminish in value year by year. If, therefore, the library is not to lose its character it must be kept abreast with the most recent advances in knowledge at any cost, and a large portion of its revenues may be described as mortgaged to particular branches of literature. It is, therefore, most fortunate that it should have been reinforced by another institution planned on different lines and bringing to the partnership a literary stock in no respect less suitable for a great, and more especially a great American library, but lying outside the

peculiar range of the Astor. The fusion of the Astor and the Lenox libraries into a single institution was indeed a stroke of the highest wisdom.

Mr. Astor created and richly endowed his great institution, but did little to stamp his own personality upon it. The Lenox Library, on the other hand, reflects in a very marked degree the idiosyncrasy of its founder. A most lively account of Mr. Lenox may be met with in the *Recollections of Mr. James Lenox*, by the late Henry Stevens, of Vermont, bookseller and bibliographer, who purveyed American and much other rare literature for the British Museum and steadily built up the Lenox Library by buying rarities for Mr. Lenox in Europe. Mr. Lenox was a shy recluse bachelor whose natural disposition to solitude was intensified by the memory of an unhappy affection. Born to a wealthy inheritance, he had, like Astor, increased his fortune by successful investments in land. The ordinary ostentations of wealth had no charm for him; he shunned society, except when fulfilling what his strong religious feelings led him to consider the duty of presiding over the New York Bible Society, but noiselessly and imperceptibly picked up, one after the other, the book or manuscript, or picture, or engraving, or gem that had attracted his fancy. A man so secretive and fastidious must be an amateur; and Mr. Lenox's library is the reflection of exquisite taste displayed in particular directions, but with as many blanks as prizes.

Mr. Stevens says:

"Mr. Lenox excelled all men I ever knew for seizing ideas and perseveringly running them out to the end. His first absorbing *penchant* was for collecting early editions of the Bible and parts thereof in all languages. Then he took to books relating to North and South America, including all the great collections of voyages and travels, as well as the original editions of which they were composed. Besides these he took very early to his favorite author, John Bunyan, and undertook to collect all editions and translations.* In the same manner he undertook to bring into his net all the editions of Milton, and his collection of Miltons excels that of the British Museum and that of the Bodleian put together. This mode of collecting has certainly its advantages, but it can hardly be denied that it is attended with serious disadvantages. The result of all Mr. Lenox's enormous study and labor, to say nothing of his vast expenditure, it must be confessed, is 'a patchy library' as he left it. His favorite subjects and authors he rendered astonishingly rich, but the subjects and authors he neglected at the same time are also astonishingly numerous."

* Mr. Lenox possessed the first edition of *Pilgrim's Progress* long before the British Museum had it.

He would also appear to have been highly capricious in dealing with books of the classes which he did collect. It seems almost incredible that a special collector of books relating to America, with boundless resources and who had proved his determination as a purchaser times without number, should have refused to acquire the inestimable drawings by Captain John White, attached to Raleigh's expedition in 1585-86, which the British Museum was in consequence enabled to buy for no more than £235, or little more than three pounds apiece. More amazing still is Mr. Stevens's assertion, in which he cannot well be mistaken, that he vainly sought to induce Mr. Lenox to buy an original printed copy of the Bull by which Pope Alexander VI divided the world between Spain and Portugal, which one would have thought, after Columbus's letters, the most tempting publication in the world for an American collector. These instances, alike of Mr. Lenox's spirit and enlightenment as a collector and of his occasional wrong-headedness, prove the extreme advantage of the step which has been actually taken of uniting the Lenox Library with another formed on a different principle. Its Bibles, Shakespeares, Bunyans, Izaak Waltons, De Brys, Art Books, Spanish MSS., though not in themselves sufficient to constitute the pith and substance of a great library, would enhance the riches of any library in the world and supply a number of fulera or starting-points for future progress. It should be the constant endeavor of Mr. Lenox's successors to perfect everything commenced by him, but a large and liberal interpretation should be given to this maxim. It appears, for instance, from Mr. Stevens's account, that Mr. Lenox, after making a brilliant purchase of early Shakespearian quartos, seemed to feel that he had done enough in this line and could never be tempted to buy another. As a private individual he, perhaps, had done enough: as a trustee for the public he had not, and now that his library has emerged from its ambiguous condition as a semi-private institution only accessible under severe restrictions and become merged in the great popular institution which Mr. Tilden's munificence has allowed to be created, it may be expected that the managers will feel it their business to go on where Mr. Lenox stopped, and will consider that the same reasons which justify the acquisition of early Shakespeares equally justify the purchase of the works of Shakespeare's dramatic and

poetical contemporaries, and no less so that of any works of Shelley, Landor, Tennyson, or any modern author which rank as bibliographical treasures. Supposing all the funds emanating from Mr. Lenox's bequest to be dedicated to this end, Mr. Tilden's bequest and the public liberality must be invoked to fill the voids alike beyond the purview of Mr. Lenox and Mr. Astor.

If, then, the directors of the great New York library of the future address themselves especially to the task of remedying the defects which at present prevent the libraries out of which it is formed, even when united as a whole, from taking rank among the world's chief libraries, they will probably find that an enlargement of aim is not so much required either in the department of bibliographical rarities or that of standard treatises, as in that of fugitive literature. The problem, in fact, will be to metamorphose libraries reflecting individual predilections and professional objects into a library in which every interest of a great community is equally considered in the proportion of its importance, just as the library of Sir Hans Sloane became the nucleus of that of the British nation. It would be improper and superfluous to prescribe to so intelligent a body of men as the managers are certain to be, aided, moreover, by the advice of so distinguished a librarian as the present chief director, the line which it becomes them to take, dependent as this must be upon many considerations not obvious to a foreigner. Two propositions, nevertheless, may almost be taken for granted. The library will be above all things American, one in which American literature, history, politics, and social life will hold the first place. The second object will be to remedy as far as possible the disadvantage under which the American citizen labors by his exclusion from the intellectual resources of Europe.

The formation of a national American library involves that close attention to the collection of fugitive literature which has already been pointed out as a principal object in the conduct of the new institution. National life paints itself more vividly in the literature of the hour than in that which aims at permanence. The latter is most commonly only the verdict of the morrow upon the doings of the day: the former is the authentic self-portrayal of the day itself. This fugitive literature is, moreover, deserving of special care for the same reason as that which Goethe gives for

preferring the culture of the Beautiful to that of the Useful. "We should encourage the Beautiful, for the Useful encourages itself." Literature aiming at permanence takes steps to make itself permanent: it advertises and reviews itself and soon makes its way from the counter of the bookseller to the shelf of the library, where indeed it often remains. But the literature which only aims at supplying the passing want requires to be appraised while it is yet existent; and secured while it is yet within reach.

In speaking, however, of the value of fugitive literature to the student of national development and national manners, and hence to the librarian intrusted with the interests of these classes, we must not overlook the wide distinction between the literature of this class which aims simply at amusements than that whose avowed purpose in actual effect is to instruct. Of the former it may be truly said that a little will go a great way. No library with any pretensions to first-class rank would be content with less than a complete representation of contemporary writers of admitted genius, such as a Rudyard Kipling or a Pierre Lôtî, but it is by no means necessary to import every "decadent" novel from France to prove that *fin de siècle* threatens to become synonymous with *fin de la littérature*. The titles of the books alone might be held to establish the assertion, reinforced by the critical notices of them which must find their way into the library in better company. But the fugitive literature which aims at conveying information is of a very different class. Strictly speaking, it is in general not literature at all; poorly written, limited in interest, and frequently most untrustworthy. Nevertheless, it paints the daily life of the community as nothing else could and not only provides the future historian with material, but subjects his work to the revision of a later generation. Apart from the great importance which a particular pamphlet may acquire, should its appearance at an especial crisis render it historical, or should it prove to have been written or inspired by a celebrated man, there are periods and persons which would have passed without a trace but for the existence of a pamphlet literature. Who, for example, would have known anything about the internal history of the Presidency of Madras previous to the introduction of newspapers, or of Sir John Franklin's adventures as Governor of Tasmania, but for the pamphlets evoked by injured feelings

and damaged pockets? It is, indeed, true that the extent and importance of pamphlet literature has been greatly restricted by the development of the periodical press. Yet the bibliography of the Dreyfus affair, for example, reveals what an important part the pamphlet can still perform; and if the statesmen and men of letters of the first class who would in former days have been pamphleteers now, to the grief of minor contributors, send their lucubrations to the principal reviews the pamphlet is still the great medium for the discussion of issues of a local or national or merely personal character. To it are largely confided proposals for minor reforms and municipal improvements, denunciations of real or supposed abuses, ecclesiastical and academical disputes, rectifications of erroneous assertions, the pretensions of claimants from the King of the Cannibal Islands downward, golden visions of ages of vegetarianism, projects for the fructification of the Great Sahara and a more accurate survey of the Mountains of the Moon. If it is deemed anywhere that this class of literature is unsuited for the public library we differ; it is the *private* library for which it is of little use. Since the development of the newspaper press, pamphlet literature can no longer be termed, as it might have been at one time, the mirror of the age, but the enormous extent of newspaper literature with which, in Anglo-Saxon countries at least, no library can hope to deal adequately that is not created, constructed, and maintained for the especial purpose renders the insulation of special subjects in a pamphlet form extremely acceptable. The question of the expediency of collecting fugitive literature at all admits of an easy criterion. Is the scope of your library limited? Then have nothing to do with pamphlets, except in so far as they illustrate your own specialty. Is it general? Then give all the attention to fugitive literature you can afford, except in those cases, such as that of the decadent French literature alluded to above, where a handful is a sufficient sample of the sack. This can never be the case with publications dealing with actualities, for there must be something peculiar and original in every man's manner of contemplating a public question, a private quarrel, or a moral problem. Nor should it be forgotten that the library of the first class does not seek to compete with the free public library in its mission of furnishing the community with what the community chiefly wants to read,

but rather aims at amassing what would not be easily found outside of it. This principle applies just as much to useful literature as to the literature of mere curiosity. The Astor Library, intent on the encouragement of science, has done much by collecting important scientific papers involving the acquisition of the long and costly sets of academical publications in which these originally appeared and which, perhaps, were not to be found in any other American public library. The same principle applies equally to the collection of fugitive literature. Let not him who resorts to the library for any good purpose be disappointed if it can be helped. It would be needless to insist upon a consideration so obvious as that in the collection of general literature the first place is due to that of the United States themselves; the second to that of the nations with which they are connected by blood—that is, Great Britain with her Colonial Empire or by neighborhood, like the South-American States; the third to that of the rest of the world in the general order of its importance to humanity, though special circumstances might arise justifying a departure from this rule.

These remarks have reference to the current literature of the present age and of periods yet in the future. It is hardly probable that any one will dispute the proposition that one of the most obvious duties of a library designed for permanence is to arrest the semblance of itself cast by passing time upon the mirror of its literature and to preserve it for the contemplation of time to come. But the question whether the librarian's zeal should carry him back into the past, save in the case of acknowledged classics and bibliographical rarities, may give occasion for controversy. It is hardly probable, indeed, that any American will object to the collection of literature relating to his own country. But in America, as elsewhere, there are doubtless large classes incurious about foreign lands and unable to conceive that the history of any country can have an interest except for its own citizens. It might suffice to reply that when the Venezuela question came up the British Museum authorities were delighted to find that their Government could hardly ask them for anything which they had not got; and that when the Spanish War broke out those United States libraries were doubtless most esteemed which proved to be best equipped with books on Cuba and the Philippines. But we would take higher ground, and insist that the citizen has

a right to be provided with the means of efficient study in any and every department of knowledge without being compelled to cross the ocean to find it. The principle is admitted as regards scientific books; no one would think of sending a mathematical student to Italy to imbibe Cremona or to Russia to digest Lobatschewsky. Strangely enough, it is as regards history and literature that opposition has been audible. The theory has been enunciated that it is the duty of every country to form as comprehensive a collection as it can of books relating to its own history and other matters peculiar to itself and leave other nations to do the same; so that a scholar like Lord Acton, who, when superintending a universal history of modern Europe, did not need to visit more than nineteen European libraries in quest of his materials. If this view is sound, no institution in Europe has wasted so much money as the British Museum, nor is there such another monstrosity as the grand collection of French Revolutionary Tracts which has hitherto been esteemed one of its greatest glories. The extreme narrowness of such a theory speaks for itself, but it may be pointed out in addition that its very practicability depends upon an amount of co-operation among libraries very unlikely to be obtained and that it overlooks the fact that no literature and no history can be profitably studied by itself. It is to be hoped that New York will take care that the serious inquirer within her precincts into any department of human knowledge shall, so far as may be, find the materials ready to his hand. That such a conception makes a heavy demand upon the resources and public spirit of even such a community as that of New York is evident: but New York is not only a wealthy and enlightened but a highly cosmopolitan city, with a population to which all civilized countries have contributed some element and a host of crowding and jostling interests, religious, political, commercial, financial, scientific, and literary. It will probably be found that none of these tastes and pursuits of a myriad-minded community can with justice be neglected or postponed to the others, and that the logical outcome of the situation created by the union of the three libraries will be the ultimate formation of such a library out of the bequests of Astor, Lenox, and Tilden, as the British nation has built up out of the bequest of Sir Hans Sloane.

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